



State Board of Education Vision of Public Education in North Carolina: A Great Public Education System for a Great State

Adapted from the report submitted by Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd

Great states have great public education systems, and great public education systems require great states. A great state boasts a dynamic and diverse economy with economic opportunities for all of its citizens. A great state enjoys a culture of innovation and creativity as well as vibrant arts, its natural resources and other cultural and recreational opportunities. The State Board of Education's vision of a public education system builds on the state's constitutional commitment to education and emphasizes the state's responsibility for assuring a strong and coherent system that serves all students and that is geared toward the promotion of the public interest.

Public education: the foundation for democratic institutions and economic prosperity

A forward-looking vision for education in North Carolina must be grounded in a continued commitment to public education as the foundation of our democratic institutions and the engine of economic growth. Public schools equip students with the knowledge, skills and perspectives they need to engage in reasoned and civil debate of public issues. A strong public school system provides a steady flow of skilled workers, especially in emerging areas such as advanced manufacturing where many employers are struggling to find workers.

Ambitious and evolving educational standards

A great public education system is one that prepares all students for postsecondary education, careers, citizenship and lifelong learning. It sets high standards and fosters the critical thinking and other skills needed in today's global economy. A great state education system must evolve over time in response to changes in the state's economic, technological, and social contexts as well as in response to developments in other states and the world.

Public and individual benefits

The State Board's vision fosters both a spirit of individual freedom and a sense of common purpose. The children who are educated receive the opportunity to maximize their potential and pursue their personal dreams and aspirations. These benefits include the opportunities to attend post-secondary education, enhanced employment opportunities, higher earnings, better mental and physical health, greater political, social and cultural awareness and a higher quality of life. A public education system builds connections between public schools and the civic and social purposes for which they were established and that justify the use of taxpayer dollars to fund them. It provides a structure that allows the various stakeholders – students, teachers, administrators, parents, state and district policymakers, the business community and others, schools and universities – to work together in pursuit of common goals.

The importance of diversity and equal opportunity

A strong public education system in North Carolina promotes the state's civic and economic functions by celebrating the diversity of our population and providing a high quality educational opportunity to all children regardless of their backgrounds or where they live. Public schools are most successful in promoting democratic traditions when they embody important values such as fairness, equity, inclusiveness and respect for diversity of opinion in their own operations. And in many cases, publicly-funded schools are one of the few places in our society where young people have the opportunity to learn, work and play with those whose backgrounds and perspectives differ from their own.

A coherent and flexible system

The State Board's vision encourages diverse and innovative means of delivering education while assuring that each element of the system shares a commitment to the broad purposes of public education, including the maximizing of opportunity for all students. A strong state public education system offers a wide range of content that serves the needs of students with varying academic and career/technical interests, and it offers students and parents the opportunity to make choices among a variety of schooling options with differing missions and educational philosophies.

This vision emphasizes community and cooperation. It provides a mechanism for promising improvements and innovations to be widely distributed. It will require that relevant policymakers and practitioners – both those within the education sector and those in related areas such as family and child services – work together to make strategic decisions about how best to organize the delivery of education in each community to meet the public interest.

Charter schools, Cooperative and Innovative High Schools, the North Carolina Virtual Public Schools and other recent educational innovations can serve as sources of experimentation and innovation and provide quality educational alternatives. These schools have a legitimate claim on taxpayer funds to the extent that they further the overall purposes of the state education system. In practical terms, this means these options must be accessible to all students and held to the same high standards of academic, fiscal and other forms of accountability as traditional public schools.

Because many students move between the private and public sectors, some form of coordination between these sectors is appropriate. If public funds were to be made available – whether in the form of school vouchers for parents or state revenue foregone in the form of tax credits for scholarships – the private and religious schools benefitting from such funds would need to be incorporated far more explicitly into the public school system. That would be necessary because state policymakers have a responsibility to the state's taxpayers to assure that the funds are being used to promote the public interest and not just the interests of the direct beneficiaries.

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